

Hypertension

Hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, is called the silent killer because it usually has no symptoms. Some people may not find they have it until they have trouble with their heart, brain, or kidneys. Nearly 1 in 3 American adults has high blood pressure. Once high blood pressure develops, it usually lasts a lifetime. The good news is that it can be treated and controlled.

When high blood pressure is not found and treated, it can cause:

- The heart to get larger, which may lead to heart failure.
- Small bulges (aneurysms: AN-u-risms) to form in blood vessels. Common locations are the main artery from the heart (aorta); arteries in the brain, legs, and intestines; and the artery leading to the spleen.
- Blood vessels in the kidney to narrow, which may cause kidney failure.
- Arteries throughout the body to “harden” faster, especially those in the heart, brain, kidneys, and legs. This can cause a heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, or amputation of part of the leg.
- Blood vessels in the eyes to burst or bleed, which may cause vision changes and can result in blindness.

Blood is carried from the heart to all parts of your body in vessels called arteries. Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against the walls of the arteries. Each time the heart beats (about 60-70 times a minute at rest); it pumps out blood into the arteries. Your blood pressure is at its highest when the heart beats, pumping the blood. This is called systolic (sis-TOL-ik) pressure. When the heart is at rest, between beats, your blood pressure falls. This is the diastolic (di-a-STOL-ik) pressure.

Blood flows because the cells of the body need oxygen and food to survive. Oxygen and nutrients are carried to all parts of the body through the blood. Blood pressure is the force of blood as it presses against the walls of the arteries, like the pressure of water in a garden hose.

Blood pressure varies all the time. Exercise or emotional stress can increase the blood pressure. The increased blood pressure allows more blood to be pumped to the body to help the body cope with increased activity or stress. The body can tolerate such a temporary rise in blood pressure.

Still, for most of your waking hours, your blood pressure stays pretty much the same when you are sitting or standing still. That level should be lower than 120/80 mmHg. When the level stays high, 140/90 mmHg or higher, you have high blood pressure. With high blood pressure, the heart works harder, your arteries take a beating, and your chances of a stroke, heart attack and kidney problems are greater.

The exact causes of hypertension are not known. However, certain factors are associated with high blood pressure. People who smoke, are overweight, eat salt and fat regularly, drink excessively, are stressed or are not physically active are at a higher risk of developing high blood pressure.

The only way to detect hypertension early enough to prevent its serious complications is by checking the blood pressure regularly. A physician, a nurse or any other healthcare provider can help check for hypertension.

Controlling hypertension means a lifelong commitment to changing some eating and lifestyle habits. Medications may also be necessary to bring high blood pressure back to normal.

Hypertension is a disease that causes serious and fatal complications. However, early detection and aggressive control has helped millions of people live healthy and long lives. The patient's help and persistence are essential to control hypertension.

Your healthcare provider may have additional resources to help you take the necessary steps for preventing and controlling hypertension. With the help of your healthcare provider, you can give yourself the best chances for a long and healthy life.

People age 55 and over can receive healthy lifestyle information on high blood pressure through SenioRx/Wellness. The program also provides free prescription medicine to people that qualify. Call 1-800-243-5463 for more information or to sign up for SenioRx/Wellness. This program is a partnership between the Alabama Department of Senior Services and the Alabama Department of Public Health.